

**Maj. Gen. Torrence Saxe**

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**Alaska National Guard**

*Department of Military  
and Veterans Affairs*

Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska

**STATE OF ALASKA**

**PRESS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

20-106

**November 20, 2020**

By Edward Eagerton

*Joint Force Headquarters Public Affairs*

## **Honor and tradition – Alaska Native Guardsman reflects on life and selfless service**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** — November is National American Indian Heritage month, also known as American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month. During this time, the U.S. Armed Services honors and celebrates the diverse cultures, traditions, and histories of America's indigenous people who have served their nation.

2nd Lt. Laurel Foster, a Cup'ik Eskimo, has served in the military for over 12 years, and now serves as the operations officer with the 168th Security Forces Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard.

"My mother is Cup'ik from Mekoryuk, Alaska," said Foster, "which is a small village on Nunivak Island, about 30 miles offshore from the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers delta. I was born in Bethel, but have lived in Bethel, Dillingham, Platinum, Kotzebue, Unalaska, and have been in Anchorage now for about 23 years."

Foster explained that she always wanted to join the military, after growing up seeing the National Guard conduct training in her hometown of Bethel. In 2008, she enlisted into the Alaska Air National Guard as a Security Forces member.

"I remember seeing the National Guard in our elementary school gym conducting their training and wishing I could do that one day," she explained. "In high school, I carried out that desire and joined the Navy ROTC. I have always had a heart for service. I initially wanted to join the Navy but became pregnant with my son shortly after high school."

Through the course of her enlisted career, she served both full-time in the National Guard, as well as doing tours with the active duty Air Force. After completing a paralegal apprentice course, she worked in the 176th Wing Legal Office until she was commissioned as an officer in 2019. She now commutes to her traditional Guard position at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks for drill weekends and annual training.

Foster reflected on what it was like growing up in a small village in rural Alaska, what being an Alaska Native meant to her, and how the elders telling their stories keeps the spirit of Alaska Native culture alive by passing it from one generation to the next.

"I remember eating traditional foods, subsistence fishing and berry picking, spending time listening to my elders tell stories," she recalled. "I remember running around with my cousin and brother on the tundra, fishing for blackfish and playing a lot of football and basketball, getting dirty and having fun. My

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grandparents', aunts', and uncles' storytelling is one of my most cherished memories. This is a major part of the Native culture; it's how the history and traditions are passed on."

As Foster elaborated on what it means to be an Alaska Native, she articulated that there is an inherent sense of respect and thoughtfulness that goes into the world surrounding them, from the state of Alaska and its beautiful lands, to the people that make up these communities.

"It means making the most effective use of available resources," she said, "and it means respecting elders and taking care of them, as they once had taken care of you. Alaska Native culture is very much one of service to others, to your community, and to the greater good of the people and society. The Alaska Territorial Guard is an extraordinary example of that."

Foster's grandfather, also known as her "Uppa," served as an intelligence specialist for the Alaska Territorial Guard during World War II. She explained that it is important to remember the service of Alaska Natives in the military, a point which has not always been recognized at the time, and something she feels is an important story to tell.

"Official veteran status recognition wasn't even awarded until over 50 years after these Alaska Territorial Guardsmen served," said Foster. "My Uppa had passed away long before his service to this country was officially recognized and granted veteran status. If that's not selflessness and duty to community and country, I don't know what is."

In 2000, qualifying ATG members were granted US veteran status acknowledging the contribution of the Native Alaskans who bravely served our country during World War II. An ATG Task Force was assembled in 2009 by the State of Alaska Office of Veterans Affairs which began an intentional effort to search for ATG members to provide them with honorable service records, including an honorable discharge and veteran's benefits. The effort resulted in many ATG members being recognized in personal ceremonies throughout the state since, and the effort continues, sometimes posthumously with family members.

Foster explained that her service is not only for the good of the community, but that she feels it is her duty, like the elders before her, to communicate her story to others to pass down the history and meaning behind what it means to be an Alaska Native.

"I feel it's my responsibility as an Alaskan Native woman in the National Guard to ensure that legacy stays very much alive as part of Alaska's history and a part of my family legacy," she said. "I was also very much unaware, until recently, of the Alaska Native female scouts that also served during World War II.

"As a woman in a very male-dominant organization," Foster continued, "historical moments such as that should very much stand out, but I don't believe they stand out enough. Through my service, I think it's my responsibility to find a way to change that."

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Special note: The Alaska Territorial task force is committed to finding and assisting these veterans, their families, dependents and survivors in receiving all the benefits and rewards entitled to them. The Office of Veterans Affairs' goal is to locate 100 percent of the ATG members, continue correcting oversights of the past, and allow future generations access to their ancestors' service records. For more information, please contact Magen James, Executive Director, Alaska Forget Me Not Coalition at [Magen.james2@alaska.gov](mailto:Magen.james2@alaska.gov), 907-334-0873.

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## PHOTOS

1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)

<https://www.dvidshub.net/image/6431676/honor-and-tradition-alaska-native-guardsman-reflects-life-and-selfless-service>



2nd Lt. Laurel Foster operations officer with the 168th Security Forces Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard, poses with a photo of her great grandfather, Leonard Mathlaw, and her grandfather, Rex Mathlaw, both of whom served in the Alaska Territorial Guard. (Photo courtesy of 2nd Lt. Laurel Foster)